DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 859 RC 018 172

AUTHOR Francis, Ray
TITLE Teacher Strike in a Rural State: Ready for Reform.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the 1991 Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Participative Decision Making; Rural Areas; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Morale; Teacher Participation; Teacher Salaries; *Teacher Strikes
IDENTIFIERS *West Virginia

ABSTRACT

In March 1990, teachers in 80% of the counties in West Virginia participated in a teacher strike. In this study, 83 striking teachers answered 10 open-ended questions put to them either through an interview or a questionnaire. The information was analyzed through a thematic analysis process. Teachers overwhelmingly felt they were not given the opportunity to be active participants in the decision making process. West Virginia typically operates under the "top-down" model of decision making. Teachers expressed feelings of being abandoned by the legislature, because legislators failed to listen to teachers and did not support adequate funding for education. Teachers banded together to build a unified voice for education, and saw a strike as the only alternative that remained. Teachers identified pay and pay equity as only a small part of the reasons they were striking. They indicated a need for educational reform and adequate resources to provide education. Teachers did not view the strike as harmful to students and believed that the strike would benefit the educational system as a whole. Their strongest comments dealt with teachers who continue to work during the strike. As a result of the strike, the governor held a special legislative session during which a senate bill was produced, calling for various changes in the educational system, including review of teacher preparation programs, establishment of school curriculum teams, and the implementation of individual school faculty senates. This report includes 16 references. (KS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED332859

TEACHER STRIKE IN A RURAL STATE:

READY FOR REFORM

Ray Francis

602 Allen Hall

West Virginia University

Morgantown WV 26506

Paper presented at the 1991 National AERA Conference
held in Chicago IL, April 3-7, 1991

Special thanks to Dr. Helen Hazi for her help in framing
and developing this study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC018172

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Raymond Francis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INTRODUCTION

Spring is a time when teachers and students should still be in school. This is also a time when the coal mines in West Virginia might be on strike. In the spring of 1990 there was something different in West Virginia, the mines were working and the picket signs were in front of the schools.

With the state's legislative session in full swing, it happened. The first ever statewide teacher strike in the history of West Virginia. On March 7th, 1990 the first eight county teacher associations took their action. Within two days over 80% of the county teacher associations would follow. Slogans appeared like:

"WE DIDN'T START THIS FIRE"

"SAVE OUR SCHOOLS"

"QUALITY EDUCATION IN WEST VIRGINIA - NOW"

these slogans as well as many others were printed on picket signs. The picket signs were carried by teachers, parents, and students throughout the state of West Virginia.

Administrators in the striking counties scrambled to develop and implement policy. Schools were closed, or operated on delays with reduced staff. For a change, state policy makers had actually stopped to listen to the teachers of the state. Education had at last became a heated topic. A topic that was talked about by almost everyone. It was no longer just educators that discussed what had happened, and what would happen.

The event has been described as a strike and as a work stoppage. The Webster's New World Dictionary allows for the definition of a strike as "to refuse to work until certain demands are met". This definition is applicable to the purpose of the actions taken by West Virginia educators in the Spring of 1990.

When a profession decides to conduct a strike it is often viewed as being more serious than when labor makes a contract stand. The actions of these professionals leads to several questions to be answered. Question about striking professionals and their actions. This research is attempting to provide insight into the events teachers saw as leading up to this strike, as well as their beliefs about the educational system in West Virginia.

Overview of West Virginia as a Rural State

West Virginia has long been viewed as a state with a depressed economy (Doman, 1983). The state has its traditional economy based in coal, manufacturing, and service-producing industries (Hazi, 1990). There has been a recent emphasis on promoting travel and tourism in the state (Julian, 1990). Even when the coal mines of the state were producing at peak levels the state remained poor.

Another indicator of West Virginia's poor economic status is the statistic that the state has ranked forty-ninth in per capita income (1986). West Virginia has ranked third in the nation for people who received federal food stamps (Hazi, 1990).

The population centers of the state of West Virginia are congregated around its fourteen cities with populations of greater than twenty thousand people. These cities tend to lay along three traditional trade routes (Athey, 1989) leaving the remainder of the state sparsely populated and geographically separated. With populations and industries of the state lying in only very limited areas the tax base of the state is very diverse. This diversity has led to a great difference in the starting teacher salary. West Virginia also ranks forty ninth nationally in teacher pay.

The school system in West Virginia is divided into fifty five individual systems based on the individual counties within the state. Schools in this state reflect the diverse and rural nature of the state. High schools located in, or near, population centers may have student populations that reach to twenty one hundred students. While high schools located away from population centers may have populations that range from sixty five to five hundred students. In one school the entire male portion of one graduating class made up the starting five members of the boys basketball team.

Recent History of Education in West Virginia

Concern about education in West Virginia is not a new topic. As in most places the schools shoulder the burden of being classified as the "root of the problem"--regardless of the problem being discussed. West Virginia is a state where collective bargaining does not exist. Teacher unions are as illegal as a teacher strike. The following represents some

of the major events related to education that have developed in West Virginia since the early 1980's.

In 1982 legal action dealing with the very nature of public education was brought to public attention in the case of Pauley vs. Bailey. The result of this legal action, which became known as the "Recht Decision", was that public education in West Virginia was declared "woefully inadequate". The decision indicated West Virginia lacked certain "essential ingredients" needed to have a thorough and effective educational system (Hazi, 1989). The Recht Decision eventually led to the formation of several state-level committees and the "Master Plan for Public Education in West Virginia". The plan has become known simply as the "Master Plan". This document specified criteria for schools that dealt with facets of the school systems from facilities to time spent teaching in the various content areas. The plan made use of on-site inspections by review teams as a method of evaluating the progress of the county systems within the state.

In 1987 teacher pay and quality education in West Virginia had once again become a media topic. The teachers in the state met and voted to strike unless a pay raise was granted. A 5% raise was given and the strike was averted. In the fall of 1987 the West Virginia Education Association endorsed, then candidate, Gaston Caperton who would eventually be elected governor.

In the January 1990 State of the State address Governor

Caperton promised to deliver a 5% pay raise to teachers in the state. The 1990 legislative session continued and educational issues were not addressed. On February 15th, 1990 over 6,000 teachers decided to "skip school" and rallied at the state capitol. In March the governor met with teacher association leaders, but maintained there was no further money available to be committed to education. At this time, state educators vowed to discontinue services if educational issues were not addressed by the state legislature.

On March 7th, 1990 eight counties in the State of West Virginia carried out their threat. The first teacher strike in the history of the state had began. By March 9th, the number of striking counties had risen to forty. In some counties the schools were closed. While in other counties, schools remained open with non-striking teachers and administrators.

It was during the period, from March 8th through the 14th that the information for this investigation was collected.

Decision Making Model for West Virginia

One widely used system for decision making in the public schools is known as a top down model (Boyer, 1988). In this model decisions are made by individuals at one level of the system. These decisions are then imposed on members of the organization located at lower levels within the organization.

In each case the individuals within the system may be identified on a hierarchy. Individuals making the decisions

will be located above those being imposed upon. Individuals at these lower levels may, or not be, consulted or given the chance for input. In other instances input may be given, but not valued.

Top down models of decision making have several positive characteristics. These models have an identified source of power (Elliott, 1976). This source is usually one person, or a small group. Top down models generate expectations of compliance and uniformity (Maeroff, 1988). Focus of the organization is maintained. The top down models of decision making rely on the individual to accomplish tasks that fit the aim of the individual(s) in power. This style of decision making is also seen as being fast and efficient.

The top down model has several negative characteristics. Individuality and creativity are suppressed. The satisfaction of workers may be diminished. When the degree of job satisfaction is decreased, productivity may be lessened as a result. Levels of stress related to the structure of the organization may increase.

Another negative aspect of top down management may be that individuals perform tasks without knowing the purpose or rationale. This may lead to negative attitudes being formed toward individuals in positions of power. This type of task performance may also lead to apathetic approaches to tasks. Work may be performed poorly, or not performed at all. Decisions concerning classroom teachers and operations may be made by individuals far removed from the classroom.

One possible alternative to the top down model of decision making would be a bottom up, or shared decision making model (Mojkowski & Fleming, 1988). In this model of decision making, the individuals at the lower end of the previous hierarchy would share in setting the goals and making the decisions (Phillips & Wolfe, 1990). The individuals in the hierarchy at the middle and upper levels would be utilized as resources, coordinators, and consultants (Field, 1990). Those individuals working directly with students would have the most input into making decisions about the schools and the school system.

The teacher's strike against the state of West Virginia then brings two questions forward about the educational system in West Virginia. First, has the individual teacher been a participant in the decision making process? Secondly, do teachers have a true voice in the decisions that will affect their classrooms?

Teachers as Non-Participants in the Process

Do teachers have a true voice in the decisions that will effect their classrooms? Voice in this instance refers to the right or responsibility to decide policy in and out of the classroom (McDonald, 1988). If in fact teachers do have this right or responsibility, then excluding them from the decision making process may lead to future problems within the education system (Conley, 1987).

In many cases classroom teachers in West Virginia appear uninvolved in the processes that dictate the policies of

their profession. Communication within the structure of the educational system of West Virginia is viewed as a one way form of communication (Darling-Hammond, 1983). The model used in making decisions has the characteristics of a top down model. Decisions are made by the state and county level policy makers. These decisions are then interpreted by local officials. The interpretations are then implemented by school administrators. Teachers are the individuals that deal with these implemented decisions.

Effective models of decision making include considerations of the individuals involved in the system. These models advocate active participation by all members in the decision making process (Hovda & Wylie, 1988, McDonald, 1988). Without active participation, the decision making process is a more resisted process (Jacoby, 1973).

Active participation in the decision making process is seen as a critical issue in attaining job satisfaction (Hartzell & Winger, 1988, Bittner-Corvin, 1988). Both the Holmes Group Report (1983) and the Carnegie Report (1983) acknowledge the lack of teacher participation in the decision making process. Both reports indicate the extreme need for teacher participation in the decision making process. It has been concluded that the traditional top down model of decision making is a failure (Shanker, 1986). Bottom up teacher-based models of decision making are being researched and promoted (Darling-Hammond, 1984, Field, 1990).

Teachers are excluded from the decision making process

and are denied their voice. Yet, teachers are held responsible for the system. So how can how can the individuals affect a change in the system when they have no active participation, and possess no real power? The apparent answer to that question is to stop the system and negotiate a new understanding.

METHODS

Participants

The teachers that participated in this investigation were actively taking part in the statewide teacher strike. This is evidenced by their walking of picket lines in one of three counties in northern West Virginia. A Total of 83 striking teachers participated in the research through either interview or questionnaire. Nine of the teachers participated in an interview process that reflected the same questions and areas of concern as the written instrument. Teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire that consisted of 10 open ended questions. These questions were designed to allow the teachers to convey their beliefs and perceptions about the work stoppage in which they were participating. The responses were also dealt with future working conditions in West Virginia's public schools after the work stoppage was settled.

Due to the time frame of the work stoppage and the reported harassing activities of some members of the teachers association, working teachers were not surveyed. The working teachers either refused to participate, or principals denied

permission to survey these working teachers during the workday. Schools made the effort to avoid releasing the names of the working teachers. This was done in an attempt to help protect the working teachers from as much harassment as possible.

Analysis

The information obtained from the participants in this project was analyzed through a thematic analysis process (Spradley, 1981). The information was first separated into idea units. These idea units were then categorized by the chronological order of the event referred to. Overall themes were then derived from the information provided by the participating teachers.

RESULTS

Several consistent themes developed from the information obtained from the striking teachers. These main themes dealt with the teacher beliefs and opinions about the condition of education in West Virginia. Other themes that developed included the unheard voice of teachers, unity, and the future of education in the state.

Non-Participation As Professionals

The first main question dealing with teachers and the state level policy makers is: Has the individual teacher been given the opportunity to be an active participant in the

decision making process? This section will deal with that question from the perspective of the striking teachers.

All of the participants in the study perceive public education in West Virginia to be in danger. In danger of failing the students, as well as the teachers in the state. Comments relayed a feeling that the teachers in West Virginia have tried to communicate their desires and needs to the state government and State Board of Education. Teachers felt they had been ignored. Steps were needed that would result in change in the classroom, not simply changes on paper. According to one striking teacher "nothing has changed, teachers have tried their best to communicate what is needed in our classrooms, and nothing has changed". He continued "every year education is proclaimed the top administrative topic and every year education gets the shaft". The teachers saw this inaction not as a political process, but rather as a lie. A lie to the teachers, and to the taxpayers of the State of West Virginia.

This feeling of helplessness and of being ignored was indicated in almost every response. The teachers indicated that this feeling and the problems in West Virginia have been building for about ten years. In reality the conditions appear to have been present for far longer.

Teacher responses consistently relayed the idea that the work stoppage was not simply a tactic to obtain a pay raise. "Certainly pay is an issue, but so is the benefit package and equity, and the whole system of funding of education in West

Virginia". Most teachers conveyed a lack of support in funding for all of education in the state, not just in pay. Teachers felt "abandoned" by the legislature. The teachers were "tired of being ignored when so much is at stake for the state".

In answer to the question; has the individual teacher been an active participant in the decision making process? The information collected from the striking teachers says "no". The overwhelming feeling was of abandonment and exclusion, not feelings of participation and inclusion.

Building a Unified Voice

As the feelings of abandonment built, and teachers continued to be ignored, a peculiar process began to happen. That process was a banding together, a building of a unified voice. As with the old saying, misery loves company. Even as teacher morale dropped and as pay raises were not given, some changes were taking place. The teachers saw "the same old song and dance taking place in state government". As teachers "watched the show" an awareness began to build.

The teachers saw the last 10 years as a time for them to build a unified voice. The teachers saw nobody listening to their problems and concerns. So they listened to each other. The time had finally come. There were no actual changes in the schools. The problems were becoming clear. The professional educators of the state had only one option left to them. To STRIKE.

One thing that was laking in the responses of the teachers was consistency of the terms of reconciliation. That is there were no definite "contract" demands made. There was no consistent set of demands explained by the teachers participating. This leads to two possible interpretations in this instance. There may have been a lack of communication inside the teachers association. Another interpretation is that teachers wanted such broad and sweeping changes that no one set of people could adequately convey these principles to the state legislature. In their words, "we want things to change, and change now!".

In addressing the second question: do teachers have a true voice in the decisions that will affect their classrooms? The interpretation of the information comes in two parts. First, the teachers believe that they do have the right to be a part of the decision making process. As professionals they are trained and educated. So as professionals they deserve to be included in making decisions that affect their professional lives. Secondly, teachers believe that they have been denied the right to be a part of the decision making process. By having a top down system of decision making, the administration has in effect eliminated teacher input.

Taking Action

With the teachers' belief that they were both excluded from the decision making process, and that public education

was in danger, what could be done? In response to the third question: How can the individuals affect a change in the system? The view of the teachers was that no acceptable alternatives remained. Save one, to strike.

Why were they walking the picket line? What were their reasons for taking part in an "illegal strike?" The teachers identified pay and equity pay as being only a small part of the problems of education in West Virginia. They referred to their students need for an education, and not having adequate resources to provide this education.

Another concern voiced by teachers was their need to be treated as professionals, not as "second class citizens" or as "slaves" by the governor. Education needs support from the legislature in the form of reform and restructuring not in the form of "lip service". The teachers also communicated that recovery of West Virginia, economic or otherwise, will not occur until "improving education in West Virginia is the top priority of all parties involved. Not just the top topic of conversation".

Teachers had felt ignored long enough, it was time to "push up our sleeves and do something." After all how can "we as teachers teach our students that they should stand up for their rights and their beliefs if we as their teachers are not willing to do the same."

Much of the media attention was given to the single issue of teacher pay. However, teachers provided a variety of concerns to be considered about education. Those issues

included educational funding, school reform, working conditions, time to teach, extra-curricular support, teaching load, community involvement, and changing the legislative process in the state. "If education is supposed to be the first thing funded in the state, why is the last thing to be placed on the legislature's agenda?"

Optimistic Outlook for the Future

Those teachers who participated in this investigation did not view the strike as causing any long term problems for their students. They believed that the strike would be of short enough duration as to be able to complete the school year. This would be done without sacrificing the previous learning and progress made by the students.

The teachers also unanimously felt that the statewide CTBS test scores would not fall. Those who made additional comments believed that if there were a decrease in the CTBS scores, the strike would not be used as a "weapon" against the teachers.

Teacher comments relayed an optimistic outlook for the future of education in West Virginia. Not just the future of the teachers, but for the students as well. Teachers believed that the strike would benefit the educational system as a whole. There is hope for education in West Virginia for the future.

The strongest comments obtained dealt with teachers who had continued to go to work during the strike. These teachers were referred to a "scabs" and "traitors". These teachers

were seen as doing much more harm to the educational system than the work stoppage itself. "By presenting a unified front we thought the legislature would sit up and take notice of the condition of education in our state, those scabs just don't realize the damage they have done to our state".

While other teachers related the idea that they did not think "that we will ever be able to work with the teachers who crossed the lines like we did in the past". The striking teachers expressed feelings of "betrayal" and the "loss of respect" for the teachers who continued to work. The feelings of the majority of the teachers may be simply summarized by the statement of one teacher. She said "those teachers who did not stand with us, but who will reap the benefits of our struggle will just have to live with themselves".

CHANGES AS A RESULT OF THE STRIKE

Once the teachers had returned to the classrooms changes began to happen in the educational system of West Virginia. Governor Caperton agreed to hold a special legislative session to deal with educational issues. This session was to be held in late August 1990.

To address the educational issues in the state, the governor's Committee on Education presented their six goals for the future. These six goals, as other goals before them, have yet to be addressed by the educational system in the state of West Virginia.

During the Spring and Summer the Office of the Governor sponsored a series of town meetings around the state. The

espoused intent of these meetings was to allow for the public to be involved in the process of education. Although apparently successful in allowing educators to speak out, the general public was apparently sparsely represented. In the only session I can speak of only about 3% of those in attendance were not directly involved with the educational system in some specific way.

As a result of the special session on education (Educational Summit), Senate Bill #1 was produced on August 30, 1990. This document called for many changes to be made in the educational system of West Virginia. Changes included the review of teacher preparation programs by a committee appointed by the governor. The document also called for the design and activation of a Center for Professional Development. The position of director for this office has only recently (Feb. 15th, 1991) been advertised. Its mission and direction are still unknown by the vast majority of the teachers in the state.

Other decisions of the Senate Bill #1 called for changes in local school board eligibility, a teaching internship during the first teaching position held in the state, the establishment of school curriculum teams, and the establishment of individual school faculty senates.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

The importance of this study lies in the future of West Virginia. In the past the response to imposed change, or

reform, in education has been either adversely hostile or apathetic. It appears that at this point in time the teaching force in West Virginia has become just that, a force. A force that is seeking reform in all aspects of the educational system.

The time has come for cooperation in educational reform to be a part of the educational system of rural West Virginia. The next steps to be taken are probably the most important ones that education in West Virginia will ever take. Will the unified voice of the teachers of West Virginia be heard or heeded? Or will it be ignored? The teachers of West Virginia appear not only ready to accept reform of the state educational system, but are demanding to actively participate in the process.

I would caution anyone from thinking that educational issues in West Virginia have been solved. It is true that measures appear to have been taken, but have they worked? What will become of the Governors Six Goals for Education? How will the Professional Development Center help the teaching force in West Virginia? What will be the eventual effect of the implementation of faculty senates in the individual schools?

We must allow time for the implementation of the new reform programs. The educational system of the state did not deteriorate overnight, and it will not be cured in one sweeping motion by the legislature. Only months have passed since the strike was settled. More time is needed to

adequately evaluate the effects of the strike. We must not jump to conclusions, positive or negative. I advocate a series of follow-up studies to determine these effects. Research on the long term effects of the strike, as well as the effectiveness of the new reform programs needs to be conducted.

REFERENCES

Bittner-Corvin, B. (1988). Logical and cultural thinking abilities of sixth through twelfth grade students and formal reasoning modes as predictors of academic achievement. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of The National Association of Research in Science Teaching. Lake of the Ozarks, GA, April 10-13, 1986.

Boyer, E. (1988). New agenda for the Nations Schools. Education Administration Quarterly, 24(10), 310-318.

The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986). Report card on school reform: the teachers speak. Princeton, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Conley, B. (1987). Critical attributes of effective educational systems. Educational Leadership, 44(7), 60-64.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1983). Teacher evaluation in the organizational context: a review of the literature. Review of Educational Research, 53(3), 285-328.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1984). Taking the measure of excellence: the case against basing teacher evaluation on student test scores. American Educator, 8(3), 26-29.

Field, T. (1991). Toward a shared vision of educational reform: establishing professional development schools. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Colleges for Teacher Education, Atlanta, March 1991.

Hartzell, G. and Winger, M. (1988). Manage to keep teachers happy. School Administration, 48(10), 22-24.

Hazi, H. (1990). School reform's obligation to teachers: lessons from a rural state. Paper presented at the 1990 National American Educational Research Association Meeting in Boston, April 16-20, 1990.

Hazi, H. (1989). Teachers and the Recht decision: a West Virginia case study of school reform. Appalachian Educational Laboratories, Charleston, WV.

The Holmes Group. (1986). Tomorrows teachers: a report of the Holmes Group. East Lansing, MI.

Maeroff, G.J. (1988). Teacher empowerment: a step toward professionalization. A Bulletin Special NASSP-Bulletin, 72(11), 52-60.

Mojkowski, C. and Fleming, D. (1988). School site management: concepts and approaches. Rhode Island Leadership Academy, Providence.

Phillips, P. and Wolfe, J. (1991). Toward a shared vision of educational renewal. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

Shanker, A. (1986). A mixed bag. Phi Delta Kappan, 68(2), 131-133.

West Virginia Department of Education (1983). A master plan for public education. Charleston: West Virginia Department of Education.

INTERVIEW / QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS

How long do you believe feelings have been building toward a teacher strike in West Virginia?

What is the primary reason for teachers refusing to teach?

What has changed that has prompted this strike?

What role have you played in this strike?

What beliefs led you to take this role?

What is your reaction to the non-action of the state law-makers?

As a member of the teaching profession, do you see yourself as management or labor?

What are your feelings about your fellow professionals who have chosen to cross the picket line?

Will student CTBS scores be an issue as a result of the strike?

How do you believe the attitudes of the teachers will affect long term relationships with A-fellow strikers, B-those who crossed the picket line, C- county administration, and D-state law-makers?